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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000500

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [KDEM](#) [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [TN](#)
SUBJECT: RIOTS IN TONGA; AMCITS HUNKER DOWN

REF: SUVA 480

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.5 (B,D).

Summary

11. (C) Rioters in downtown Nuku'alofa, Tonga, this afternoon (Nov. 16) trashed properties of PM Sevele, King George Tupou V, and some Indian and Chinese businesses. They may have been responding to a reported decision of the Tonga Parliament, that has been discussing political reforms, to end its sitting without voting for a particular plan. We hear no people have been hurt, though there has been considerable property damage. The Embassy Suva Consul, by happenstance, is in Tonga. She is fine and has confirmed all Peace Corps Volunteers are OK, too. Overwhelmed police sought assistance from the Tonga Defense Service (TDS), that has entered the streets unarmed. Given Tongan sensibilities, observers expect things to calm quickly. If that does not happen, we will coordinate with CA immediately on revised guidance for Amcits. We comment that today's events will undoubtedly cause the various elements in Tonga to reevaluate their judgments on the pace of reform. End summary.

Dueling megaphones in Nuku'alofa

12. (U) Per reftel, Tonga's Parliament is in the midst of discussion about political reforms. A National Committee on Political Reform (NCPR) proposed changes in September to begin a transformation from monarchy to democracy. Prime Minister Sevele offered his own suggested reforms, that would move at a somewhat slower pace. A group of democracy activists offered yet another formulation for faster-paced changes. In the midst of such discussion, pro-democracy protesters have gathered daily at the Pangai Si park in Nuku'alofa, across from Parliament House, for the past several days. Today, Nov. 16, the crowd was expected to be larger, around 1000 people. Actually, according to police sources, the crowd was around 3000. Until around 2:30 p.m., the crowd reportedly was noisy but peaceful. Some pro-government demonstrators also were present. Tonga police reportedly formed a line to keep the groups separate; but during taunts via dueling megaphones, something triggered a pro-democracy throng of around 500 to lose control.

Motive may be fear of slow reform

13. (C) Reports of the motivation are sketchy. Some suggest the trigger was the taunting. Others suggest the trigger was a political development. We hear that Tonga's Parliament, in the end, did not meet today. The pro-democracy elements had expected Parliament to be in session and had hoped for a vote on reforms. A rumor reportedly spread that, in fact, Parliament had decided to adjourn its sitting without taking any action on reforms except to refer the issues to a

recently formed committee. That may have been seen as simply "not good enough."

500 rioters target property of PM and King

14. (U) The unruly group rapidly proceeded through downtown streets to overturn a number of government vehicles, trash the Prime Minister's office, trash the major grocery store (owned by the PM and managed by his daughter), torch the offices of Shoreline (one of the King's major commercial enterprises), and target foreign-owned businesses, especially Chinese and Indian businesses, including the Pacific Royale Hotel (owned by the Ramanlal brothers, close business associates of the King). According to reports received by COB, nobody was injured; but many people were scared. The police were not immediately able to subdue the situation, so they asked for the Tonga Defense Service (TDS) to assist. The TDS has entered the streets, unarmed. Sources presume the situation will calm, though as of COB instability continued. Police are already working to identify the perpetrators.

Embassy Consul on the scene; PCVs safe

15. (C) Embassy Consul Debra Towry, by serendipity, has been in Tonga this week on routine consular business, working out of the Peace Corps office in Nuku'alofa. We have confirmed she is fine, and she confirmed that Peace Corps has instructed all PCVs to hunker down. She will also seek to ensure that the very modest number of Amcits in Nuku'alofa are staying off the streets for now. We informed the Operations Center. We have also attempted to call PM Sevele and Foreign Minister Tu'a to express our concerns about the riots. We could reach neither, though the DCM did reach

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Foreign Secretary Tone, who seemed only loosely aware of events.

Comment

16. (C) A riot like this is unprecedented for Tonga. Political pressures have been high ever since a big pro-democracy demonstration in September 2005 graphically illustrated popular frustration. Around that time, a few cars were burnt and one royal building was set afire in a rural area, but all that happened surreptitiously at night. Presumably, normal, quite conservative instincts will reappear rapidly. If not, we will coordinate with CA immediately on an update for Amcits. How today's events will influence political developments will be fascinating to observe. Some Tongan conservatives will surely see the riots as an example of all that can go wrong when the system is opened up. Some Tongan activists will surely call for more openness, now and more quickly, to fulfill the people's aspirations.

17. (C) The PM and King, both of whose assets were targeted today, will need to gauge the public pulse and act wisely. PM Sevele has expressed worries that the conservative elements might resist strongly if reforms come too quickly. He has downplayed the possibility of instability if reforms move too slowly. We hope the PM, in consultation with the King, will opt for openness at the fastest sensible pace.
DINGER